



State of Vermont
Vermont Department of Education
120 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05620-2501

August 25, 2009

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary, U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202-0008

Dear Secretary Duncan,

I am very encouraged by the commitment to education demonstrated by you and President Obama in the face of some extremely tough national and international challenges. The funding your administration has provided and the priorities you have established set the stage for our country to dramatically improve education for all our students, particularly those who are economically and or intellectually disadvantaged. In Vermont, we take this commitment very seriously and not only support but are actively engaged in statewide transformation efforts designed to better prepare each child for the 21st century and beyond. At the same time, I am concerned about our ability to successfully support these initiatives as a result of the reduced capacity of our department and that of local schools.

We recognize that in your position you often have to speak to the majority. However, as Vermont and other states prepare to assert their case for *Race to the Top*, we hope there will be recognition by you and your staff that, based on the culture and demographics of our communities, some states may take a different approach to accomplishing the same goals of ensuring each student is given the education they need to thrive in the 21st century. Vermont, like many other rural states, has challenges in meeting certain requirements coming out of Washington which seem tailored to large urban centers.

Vermont is a small state with just over a half a million people. We only have 14 cities with more than 8,000 people, and our largest city has a population of 38,000. Twenty percent of Vermont school districts have less than 100 students, and 70 percent have less than 500 students. Our largest school district has 3,800 students, with 12 schools in that district, one of which you recently visited. Burlington's Lawrence Barnes Elementary last year became a magnet school called the Sustainability Academy, a counter to another public magnet school in Burlington, the Integrated Arts Academy. You also visited Westford Elementary School, a small K-8 rural school that is very typical of most of our schools. Within a 25-minute drive you experienced two completely different public school environments, both working to meet our common goals. That is the flexibility we are looking for as we work to meet the new expectations for our schools.

Most Vermont schools look and act very differently from schools in urban areas. Our student-to-teacher ratio is 11:1, with the highest in the state being 20:1. Vermont's localized governance

system allows for a great deal of local decision-making about school leadership and spending. Our State Board of Education rules include a waiver process for schools to try new things, such as the magnet schools mentioned above.

And finally, several Vermont towns have designated independent schools as their public school of choice, meaning students from the tiny hamlet of Peacham (population 665) have the choice to attend the impressive St. Johnsbury Academy on public funds.

Because of our small size, we have already formed collaborative partnerships with our fellow New England states. The New England Comprehensive Assessment Program (NECAP), the first of its kind in the country, is a statewide assessment given to students in Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and now Maine. This has given us an outstanding and comprehensive assessment we could never have leveraged on our own.

We are also a member of the New England Secondary Schools Consortium (NESSC), whose bold goal is to ensure that by 2016 every public high school student in the four partner states will receive an education that will prepare them for college, career and civic responsibility in the interconnected global community of the 21st century. Our four-state consortium is also working on expanding our commonalities and drawing from the best practices of each state to improve the educational opportunities for all our students. I feel that this partnership is an example for cross-state collaborations that could be a model of a national consortium of states.

Vermont is well underway on the Transformation of Education (see attached), an initiative started by our State Board of Education and being carried out by our department and schools across the state. An example of this in Vermont is the EDGE Academy. The school's 90 8-to-13-year-old students and five teachers will work as a gradeless community of learners broken into smaller groups depending on projects and interests. Students will be taught traditional core subjects through hands-on projects chosen and designed by them. Vermont's current laws and waiver process made it possible for this community to take this dramatic change on their own rather than relying on an outside organization to do it for them. This is the spirit of Vermont citizens.

Vermont allows for several different opportunities for students, and in this way, satisfies the need for those alternatives without the formal title of "charter" school. Vermont has no laws against charter schools; they simply have not been necessary given the opportunities for success our students have. Vermont does not have the population to support alternate schools in most of our small communities. Additionally, we believe that if some schools (charter schools) are allowed advantages regular public schools do not have, it provides an unequal playing field. What we want to do here in Vermont is provide all schools with fewer impediments to be innovative and provide successful opportunities for all students. Let's not limit innovative practices to a few schools.

That being said, we do have struggling schools and we recognize the importance of creating a statewide system of support to help those schools implement dramatic reforms. However, as every state Education Department is experiencing drastic personnel reductions, I am quite concerned with our capacity to implement the assurances of both the ARRA and Race to the Top requirements along with the ever-increasing demands on our system. I would like to see some acknowledgement from you, as the Secretary of Education, of the realities facing us in meeting these obligations.

In Vermont, I am actively challenging the status quo and I expect everyone to realize that schools need to look and feel different than they have in the past in order to better prepare all of our students. I am embarking on transforming our own Education Department to better reflect the support our schools need as we ask them to alter how, when and where we deliver instruction to our students. We need to evolve from a regulatory department to one that provides a system of statewide support for improving all schools. With fewer people in our department, we need to work not just harder but smarter. However, I am starting to feel that the federal Department of Education is not truly supporting innovation in schools given the rigidity of many of the requirements expected from all schools. It would be helpful if some of the requirements currently placed on schools could be reduced to refocus our work on true transition of our educational system.

In summary, we ask that you do not handicap small, rural states because we are approaching reform differently. I also ask that you think about providing more support for state education departments as we move to support schools. I assure you that we are completely committed to the goal of ensuring each and every one of our students is given the opportunity to succeed in college, careers and citizenship.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Armando Vilaseca', with a stylized, cursive script.

Armando Vilaseca
Commissioner
Vermont Department of Education

Copy: Governor James Douglas
Gene Wilhoit, CCSSO Executive Director

Attachment: The Transformation of Education in Vermont – A Primer

Transformation of Education in Vermont – A Primer

Mission: To ensure all students are prepared for success in college, careers, and 21st century citizenship

Vision: The educational system provides each student, regardless of learning styles, gifts, challenges, circumstances or expectations, the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, careers and communities. The educational system responds to the needs of students, provides flexible learning environments rich with 21st century tools and expects students to demonstrate deep understanding through a variety of means.

For students this includes:

- Rigorous and challenging academic experiences in traditional disciplines and expanded emphasis on 21st century disciplines such as world languages, economics, entrepreneurship, personal finance, health, arts, ecology, political science
- Engagement in learning experiences that relate to their interests and connect them with the world outside of school at times and in locations that maximize learning
- Expectations that require them to demonstrate their learning through applying it in new situations
- Opportunities to receive credit for individual experiences, internships, volunteerism, service work, and non-traditional educational experiences
- Access to a broad spectrum of support services based on their individual learning needs
- Taking responsibility for their learning by demonstrating the ability to explain what they are learning, why they are learning it, and what constitutes success
- Involvement in a system that solicits, values, and respects student views on their education

For educators this includes:

- Using more time to facilitate learning in order for students to achieve deep understanding and less on dispensing facts and information
- Employing a wide variety of instructional practices that are based on the learning needs of individual students
- Teachers, administrators, and staff having access to a wide range of resources enabling them to provide a breadth of learning experiences and appropriate supports for every student
- Clear and coherent expectations for student performance in a collaborative and professional environment that supports appropriate autonomy, shared leadership, and shared accountability

For families and communities this includes:

- An active role in supporting student learning in the school as well as providing opportunities for student learning outside the school building
- Family and community members engaged in deep and purposeful planning and coordination with students and school staff regarding educational programs
- Commitment to high expectations for student performance and support for collaborative learning environments
- The benefits of the economic value of strong schools and outstanding graduates

We must remember that transforming our schools is more of a journey than a destination. Change is a long-term process that requires broad community support, steady commitment over time and the courage to embrace new ways of teaching and learning.